

river towns
report
2013

When the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) first launched the River Town Program in 2010, its goal was to help communities to recognize the river as an asset around which potential community and economic development could occur, and thus be recognized as a resource worthy of protection. For PEC, this program has evolved into a model for implementing collaborative solutions to environmental protection and restoration, by recognizing the inextricable links between the environment, the economy and quality of life.

This report describes the River Town process and highlights the successes of many of the communities who have participated in the program. The successes described are the work of many partners and the credit for all achievements belongs to the communities themselves.



background

PEC originally launched the River Town Program along the Allegheny River just north of Pittsburgh as a pilot to apply the strategies used successfully in previous asset-based community development initiatives in river towns. Models included the trail town initiatives along the Great Allegheny Passage and the C&O Canal Towpath, traditional Main Street Programs and others.

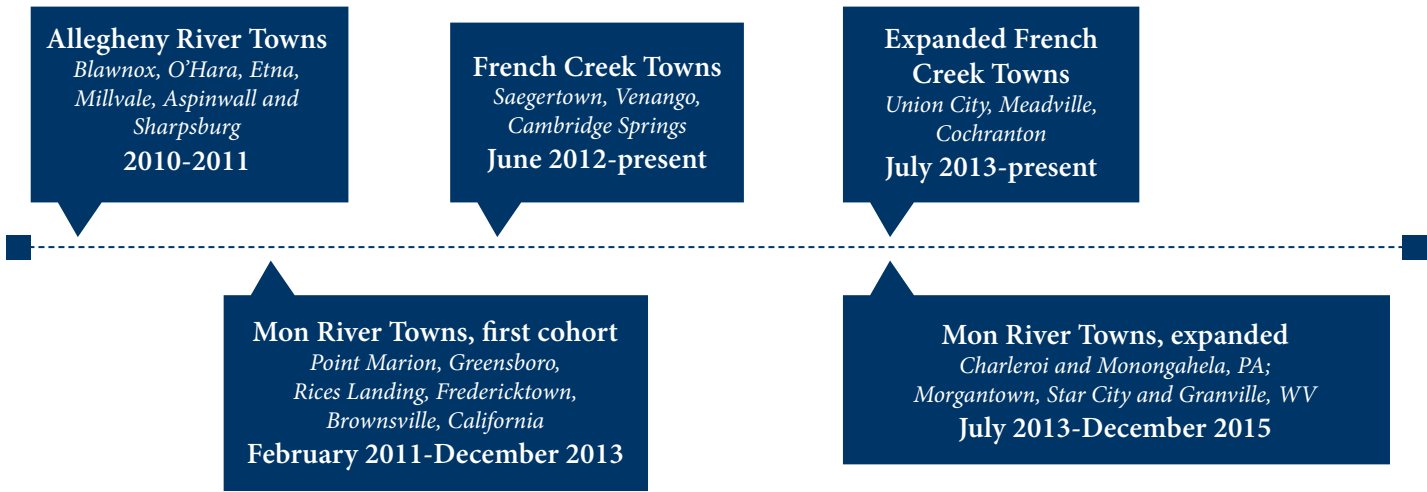
“River Towns,” the communities bordering rivers throughout Pennsylvania, were founded as manufacturing centers close to river and rail transportation. With the decline of manufacturing, these communities suffered both job loss and population decline as generations that once prospered working in industries next to the river were forced to leave to find jobs elsewhere.

The River Town model seeks to improve the vitality, stability, sustainability and prosperity of communities, businesses and neighborhoods. This is the foundation upon which related economic development, including recreational tourism and environmental initiatives, such as stormwater management, trail development and clean energy projects are built.

An increasing number of government resources and community improvement programs have been eliminated in recent years due to reduced funding, yet community and economic development programs are in greater need than ever. The River Town Program presents an opportunity to pool resources, collaborate regionally and build a broad range of professional and technical assistance in an efficient and effective manner.



river town timeline



Program Staff

PEC staff bring knowledge and experience on trail development, river conservation, stormwater management, land reclamation and fundraising to the River Town Program. To provide expertise on economic development, PEC partnered with McCollom Development Strategies. In addition, “on the ground” support is provided by the Student Conservation Association (River Town Outreach Corps).

the process

The overall objective of the River Town Program is to provide an efficient, effective, regionally-based resource to help local communities recognize the river as a potential economic and community asset, and thus a resource worthy of protection.

Strategies include:

- Economic growth based on outdoor recreational services and businesses.
- Community engagement that connects residents through outdoor recreation.
- Well-maintained business districts that offer needed goods, services and jobs and demonstrate continuous community reinvestment.
- Safe, clean, “green,” and well-maintained communities that demonstrate continuous community reinvestment.
- Effective, well-maintained and well-managed community infrastructure and resources.
- Economically and socially desirable land uses that support business growth, stability, expansion and turnover.
- Strong healthy communities based on a sound institutional foundation that supports strategic decision-making, informed action and continuous reinvestment.



the towns

Allegheny River Towns

In 2010, PEC worked with six communities along the Allegheny River, located just north of Pittsburgh: Blawnox, O’Hara, Etna, Millvale, Aspinwall and Sharpsburg. These urban communities share a common industrial past, as well as active community leadership that was ready to engage in a more comprehensive approach to sustainable development.

Successfully implemented projects include the following:

- the purchase of the Aspinwall Marina by a community organization
- improved access to the riverfront park in Millvale
- streetscape planning in Blawnox
- gateway design in Sharpsburg
- the attraction of several new business ventures in the communities
- plans for a river conservation overlay in the six River Towns as well as neighboring Shaler Township.

While billed as a pilot project, PEC’s Allegheny River Town Program has contributed to several positive outcomes. Further, the lessons learned through this pilot allowed PEC to launch the more comprehensive three-year program along the Monongahela River.

Monongahela River Towns

In the spring of 2011, PEC launched its River Town Program along the middle- and upper-Monongahela River in Fayette, Greene and Washington Counties. More rural in nature than the Allegheny River Towns, these communities have the potential to draw visitors from the Morgantown and Pittsburgh regions. Historic buildings dating back to the Revolutionary War and artifacts of the region’s glass and shipbuilding industries attract the history buff, while boating, canoeing and kayaking, and hiking and biking opportunities will satisfy outdoors lovers.

Examples of Regional Projects:

- Streetscape beautification, including installation of flower planters, painting buildings and hanging banners.
- Educational workshops on topics such as effective marketing for leasing or selling a building, websites and social media for small businesses and financing opportunities for new or expanding businesses.
- Branding and promotion, including design of a River Town logo, production of gateway signage for each community and creation of a website.

Expanded Communities

In the summer of 2013, the Program expanded to add five additional communities. This expansion marked the first time the River Town Program has crossed state lines, to include the West Virginia communities of Morgantown, Star City and Granville.

Monongahela

Monongahela is known locally as “Mon City” with a population of 4,300. The community has an active riverfront area, including the Monongahela Aquatorium, an outdoor auditorium seating 3,700 that hosts dozens of events each year. A new visitors center will soon open next to the Aquatorium.

Partners: Monongahela Merchants Association, Monongahela Area Revitalization Corporation, City of Monongahela

Key Projects:

- Signage: Highlighting the riverfront and capitalizing on the unique Aquatorium is a priority. Improved signage directing both vehicular and pedestrian traffic is needed. Situated at a crossroads of several major state roads, the high level of pass-through traffic offers a significant opportunity to reach a broad market.
- Marketing Plan: The Aquatorium, attracting thousands of visitors each summer, offers a significant opportunity to cross market, encouraging visitors to stay longer and explore the community, dine at its restaurants and discover its shops.

Changing Perceptions

Shortly after the launch of the Mon River Town Program, a professional survey of residents was conducted to assess existing attitudes towards the river. A follow-up survey was completed in late 2013 to gauge any changes over the course of the program. While still early, the results of the survey showed improvements in public perception of the river and positive opinions of the Monongahela as a great place for outdoor recreation.





Charleroi

With a population of 4,120, Charleroi is the quintessential example of a Mon Valley industrial town. It was founded and grew around glass manufacturing but now must seek other economic engines. Charleroi was once considered the Mid-Mon Valley shopping mecca and several unique shops remain. In addition to the attractive historic commercial district, Charleroi’s riverfront, largely in the control of a nonprofit trust, has multiple amenities including open space, two ball fields, a stadium site, boat launch and abundant parking.

Partners: Charleroi Borough, Mon Valley Initiative, Economic Development Authority, Charleroi Arts and Entertainment District

Key Projects:

- Signage: Charleroi’s riverfront is open to the public but the lack of signage makes it difficult for visitors to access. In addition, directional signage is needed in the business district. A comprehensive signage plan is a high priority for the Charleroi Action Team.
- Boat Launch: Contiguous to the former sports stadium, a boat launch is easily accessible but in disrepair and has no signage and limited parking. Improvements to the boat launch and opening up views to the river are priorities that are expected to improve the potential for redevelopment.

Star City, West Virginia

Star City, WV is a community of 2,000 residents adjacent to West Virginia University. Star City has a rich heritage of glass-making and coal-mining, which visitors can learn about at the Star City Glass Museum, located on the main floor of the City Building. Star City has taken advantage of its riverfront and its strategic location along the Mon River Trail, by developing the Edith Barill Riverfront Park and Tugboat Depot playground. The Terra Café is a favorite stop for visitors to Star City’s riverfront.

Partners: City of Star City, Mon River Trail Conservancy, Star City Planning Commission, West Virginia University

Key Projects:

- Park Improvements: Landscape architecture and forestry students from WVU are helping to clear view corridors and enhance the landscaping at the riverfront park.
- Improved Trail Access: To improve public access from Monongahela Avenue, plans are being made to build a walking/biking link to the Mon River Trail.
- Wayfaring Signage: To provide directional and interpretive information for visitors, plans call for improvements in wayfaring signs in Star City.

Morgantown, West Virginia

Nestled along the banks of the Monongahela River, Morgantown, WV is the bustling home of 30,000 full-time residents. Home to West Virginia University with over 29,000 students, Morgantown is a dynamic place to live, work, study and play. Morgantown has consistently been rated as one of the top small cities in America to live or start a small business.

Morgantown’s High Street commercial hub is a center of entertainment, dining and arts options for the visitor. The Metropolitan Theatre is a restored Vaudeville theater and a compelling stop for visitors. Visitors can get a glimpse of the area’s industrial and mining heritage at the Morgantown Museum and the Seneca Center, a repurposed glass factory, now a retail hub along the rail-trail. The Morgantown riverfront boasts a 56-mile rail-trail, riverfront parks, Core Arboretum, a public marina and riverfront restaurants.

Partners: City of Morgantown, Main Street Morgantown, Mon River Trail Conservancy, Board of Park and Recreation Commission (BOPARC), West Virginia University; Morgantown Area Chamber of Commerce.

Key Projects:

- Trail Amenities and Connections: Strengthen the connection between the Mon River Trail and town by improving the walkway underneath Deckers Creek Bridge, including installing lighting and signage.
- Park Improvements: Landscape architecture and forestry students from WVU are working with community members to clear view corridors and enhance landscaping at the riverfront park. This work will occur in conjunction with the official launch of the program in West Virginia in April 2014. All three West Virginia towns will participate and activities include kayak lessons, boat rides, riverfront clean-up and painting of park amenities.
- Comprehensive Riverfront Development Plan: Morgantown’s Action Team has identified the need for a comprehensive riverfront development plan to strengthen coordination of riverfront improvements in the greater Morgantown area.

Granville, West Virginia

Granville, WV, is a community of 1,500 residents located across the Monongahela River from Morgantown. Granville has recently developed a former coal-mining area into the University Town Center, a bustling shopping, entertainment and dining hub. Granville is currently planning for a waterfront park with boat launch and docking opportunities as well as picnic facilities and public restrooms. The new WVU Baseball Stadium is also being constructed in Granville and will catalyze further civic enhancements throughout the community.

Partners: City of Granville, West Virginia University

Key Projects:

- Park Improvements: Landscape architecture and forestry students from WVU are working with community members to clear view corridors at the planned riverfront park area.
- Riverfront Park: Granville has completed design plans for a riverfront park which call for a boat dock and launch area, picnic facilities, parking and a public restroom. The River Town Action Team is actively seeking sponsors for this park project.
- Mon River Bike and Running Loop: Designs are being made for a seven-mile running and biking loop that would link Granville, Star City and Morgantown.

Year 3 Communities

As mentioned above, the River Town Program works with communities to provide hands-on assistance for a period of three years. While the program will continue to be a resource for the region, the original six Mon River Towns graduated from the program in December 2013. A summary of their achievements in the first three years follows.

Point Marion

A community of 1,330, Point Marion has a distinct downtown of historic buildings, a river front park and evidence of civic pride. In 2014, the Sheepskin Trail will be constructed, connecting the town to the 43-mile Mon River Trail system in West Virginia. The community has focused on becoming visitor-ready in anticipation of the trail’s completion.

Partners: Point Marion Parks Commission; Friendship Hill Association; Point Marion Rotary

Key Projects:

- Public Art: Point Marion combined grant-funding and community contributions to install three large pieces of public art over the three years of the program: two painted murals and one glass mosaic.
- Park Improvements: The Parks Commission has significantly improved the Community Park through landscaping, clean-ups, view-clearing and invasive species removal. Simultaneously, they have expanded community programming and events to get more people into the park.
- Friendship Hill Association successfully obtained a grant for design and installation of gateway signs at the three main entrances to town. This same design is being used across all of the River Towns.

Greensboro

Greensboro, a historic town of just under 300 residents, has a small but attractive business district, including a popular bed and breakfast. One of its most popular assets is a paved two-mile walking trail, with restrooms and a gazebo overlooking the river.

Partners: Greensboro Elm Street Program; Nathanael Greene Historical Foundation

Key Projects:

- Public Art: Two large public sculptures, one grant-funded, one donated by the artist, were installed in the community.
- Events: Saturday Farmers’ Market throughout the summer and fall; Art Blast on the Mon
- Canoe/Kayak Launch: Greensboro is in the planning stages of installing a canoe/kayak launch on the Mon at Gazebo Park.

To learn more
about the Mon River Towns, including upcoming events, visit
www.monrivertowns.com.

Rices Landing

With a population of nearly 500, Rices Landing in Greene County is home to Pumpkin Run County Park, as well as two community parks with access to the river. The Greene River Trail passes through town. The Rivers of Steel Heritage Corporation owns the historic W.A. Young & Sons Foundry and Machine Shop and offers tours to the public.

Partners: Rices Landing Borough

Key Projects:

- Summer Concert Series: Public concerts offered riverside throughout the summer were started by the River Town Program in 2012. In 2013, the community continued the concert series with support and assistance from Greene County Tourism.
- Riverfest: In 2013, Rices Landing brought back its popular Riverfest, after an eight-year hiatus, attracting more than 3,000 attendees.
- Signage and Public Art: With funding through Rivers of Steel and DCNR, two gateway signs are being installed in the spring of 2014. Also to be installed in 2014 is a mural that was created by community volunteers though an Artist in Residency program offered by Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. It will be mounted along the Greene River Trail.



Business Growth and Expansions

During the first three years of the Mon River Town Program, we observed positive movement in the business sector in the original six communities.

POINT MARION:

- Point Marion Marina opened for public use in summer 2012.
- A second-hand store opened off of Main Street in 2012.
- Cut to the Point hair salon opened in summer 2012 then moved to more prominent downtown location in 2013.
- Highly-visible vacant building renovated and available for commercial lease.
- Another vacant building in heart of business district renovated with restaurant planned for ground level and apartments above.

GREENSBORO:

- Historic Greensboro Theatre building underwent significant renovations and façade improvements, with plans for artists studios and kayak rental operation on first floor with apartments above.

FREDERICKTOWN:

- The Cove Pizzeria opened in Millsboro in late 2012.
- The Greene Cove Yacht Club expanded in the summer of 2013 to offer kayak and stand-up paddle board rental and lessons, provided by Northeast Paddle Sport, whose primary location is along the Yough in McKeesport.
- When Sweet Maggie’s closed in late 2011, its spot on Front Street was quickly filled by Trisha’s Treats, a café and bake shop.

BROWNSVILLE

- Mitchell’s Café was opened in a renovated historic building in late 2012. Unfortunately, due to family stresses, the owners closed in the spring of 2013. The business is available as a turnkey operation currently.

Events

Special events are an important aspect of the River Town Program. Examples include:

- Point Marion Regatta
- Brownsville Community Day
- River of the Year Paddling Series*
- Fredericktown Ribfest
- Art Blast on the Mon in Greensboro
- California River Fest*
- 2013 Rices Landing Gazebo Summer Concert Series*
- River Fest in Rices Landing
- Party at the Point, Fredericktown
- FestiFall in Point Marion

**initiated through River Town Program*

Fredericktown

Fredericktown, with a population of 1,094, hosts multiple special events each year, including a huge 4th of July celebration, Ribfest, Party at the Point and more. A popular area for motor boats and jet skis, a priority for this community has been drawing more river users into the community and business district.

Partners: Fredericktown Area Chamber of Commerce; Maxwell Basin Recreation Area; East Bethlehem Township; Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA) Greene County Chapter

Key Projects:

- Dock Expansion Project: Leveraging a Port of Pittsburgh grant to expand and improve existing docks, the Township secured Local Share Funding and a DCNR grant to install a handicapped accessible path to the docks and to install restroom facilities.
- Street Banner Program: Banners focused on businesses and events enliven the streetscape in Fredericktown. This program will be expanded in 2014 to include the businesses facing the River.
- Traffic Calming Program on State Road 88: With the assistance of PennDOT, local officials have added a speed reader to SR 88 to slow traffic. A pedestrian crossing was also added at the request of residents.
- Public Art: Several “fish” sculptures have been created and installed throughout town to emphasize the community’s connection to the river.

California

California Borough has a population just over 5,000, and is home to California University with a student enrollment of 9,000. The community has an attractive downtown with opportunities for growth, but river access is limited. Priorities include improving river access sites, developing unused park land and connecting municipal parks via a 5.5 mile trail along the river and through the town.

Partners: California Borough Recreation Authority, California University of Pennsylvania.

Key Projects:

- Park Expansion: A plan was completed in 2013 to develop public park lands and to develop a trail and riverfront boardwalk.
- River Access: In December 2013, the Borough received a DCNR grant to improve its public boat launch. In addition, a private landowner has donated his docks to be floated downriver for public use.
- View Corridors: Work has been completed to open view corridors to the river.

Brownsville

The community of Brownsville, population 2,330, is poised for growth after the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority acquired 29 historic properties in downtown Brownsville. Key priorities for the community are redevelopment of downtown, improvement of the public wharf and improved access to Dunlap Creek.

Partners: Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation (BARC)

Key Projects:

- Community Space Improvements: High School students are working through “Operation Falcon” to adaptively reuse a parking lot as a community center and amphitheater.
- Access to Dunlap Creek and River: A dilapidated parking structure abutting Dunlap Creek was removed. The River Town Outreach Corps and Borough employees cleaned up Central Park, at the confluence of Dunlap Creek and the Mon.
- Downtown Redevelopment: BARC is currently working to renovate two historic buildings in downtown. Several regional developers have toured the town. In late 2013, BARC hired a full-time director to guide redevelopment efforts.

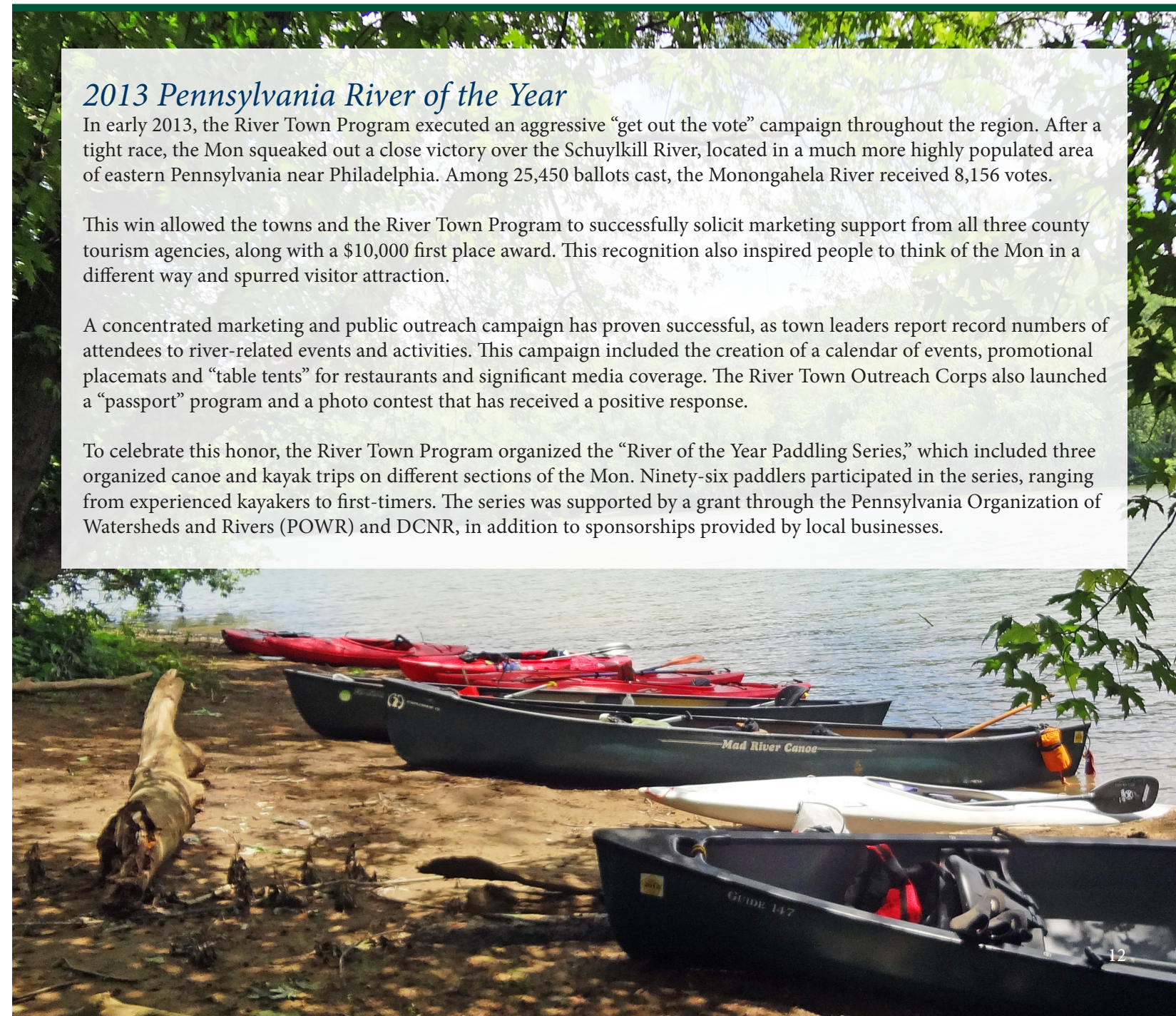
2013 Pennsylvania River of the Year

In early 2013, the River Town Program executed an aggressive “get out the vote” campaign throughout the region. After a tight race, the Mon squeaked out a close victory over the Schuylkill River, located in a much more highly populated area of eastern Pennsylvania near Philadelphia. Among 25,450 ballots cast, the Monongahela River received 8,156 votes.

This win allowed the towns and the River Town Program to successfully solicit marketing support from all three county tourism agencies, along with a \$10,000 first place award. This recognition also inspired people to think of the Mon in a different way and spurred visitor attraction.

A concentrated marketing and public outreach campaign has proven successful, as town leaders report record numbers of attendees to river-related events and activities. This campaign included the creation of a calendar of events, promotional placemats and “table tents” for restaurants and significant media coverage. The River Town Outreach Corps also launched a “passport” program and a photo contest that has received a positive response.

To celebrate this honor, the River Town Program organized the “River of the Year Paddling Series,” which included three organized canoe and kayak trips on different sections of the Mon. Ninety-six paddlers participated in the series, ranging from experienced kayakers to first-timers. The series was supported by a grant through the Pennsylvania Organization of Watersheds and Rivers (POWR) and DCNR, in addition to sponsorships provided by local businesses.



French Creek Towns

French Creek in Northwestern Pennsylvania is perhaps best known for its value as an exceptionally biologically diverse stream, with 15 species of darters, 27 species of freshwater mussels and thriving hellbender, muskrat and bald eagle populations. This waterway is also of historic importance, as it was traveled by 21-year old George Washington carrying a message from the British commander in Pittsburgh to the French army stationed in Fort LeBoeuf, during the precursor to the French and Indian War.

French Creek, as well as the scenic countryside and historic small towns it passes through, provides ample opportunity for outdoor recreation and heritage tourism. Recognizing this potential, in the summer of 2012, PEC, along with the French Creek Valley Conservancy (FCVC) launched a Creek Town program in three communities bordering the creek – Venango, Saegertown and Cambridge Springs – all located in Crawford County.



Venango

The Borough of Venango is situated on 0.3 square miles along French Creek, with a population of 288. Located along Scenic Route 6, Venango’s small but attractive business district of historic buildings presents an opportunity to attract visitors.



Saegertown

The community of Saegertown, with a population of 1,071, sits on 1.4 square miles beside French Creek. Its amenities include a grocery store, several small restaurants and close proximity to a popular boating and recreational area, Woodcock Creek Dam.



Cambridge Springs

With 0.9 square miles of land area, Cambridge Springs boasts the largest populations of the three French Creek Towns, with 2,363 residents. In addition to its scenic outdoor amenities, an historic Inn and Resort attracts regional visitors.

All three Creek Town communities participated in a kick-off event by hanging large American flags from their bridges over the July 4th holiday. Although a small gesture, this event demonstrated regional pride, unity and recognition of the importance of French Creek to each community.

Priorities across all three towns included creating a web presence to share information with residents and potential visitors; designing and installing welcome and wayfinding signage; and increasing access to the creek. Through this program, each community has created a webpage on the FCVC site, prominently branding themselves as a “Creek Town” and offering information on the attractions in their community. In addition, FCVC received grant funding through Pennsylvania’s Act 13 program to implement a signage program across all three communities.

Progress has also been made in opening up access to the creek. In Cambridge Springs, the Borough, through the Creek Town Program, deeded an existing access point in downtown to FCVC. This access had been gated for years due to liability issues but will now be re-opened to the public, providing creek users access to restrooms, shower facilities, picnic shelters and local dining options in downtown Cambridge Springs. In Venango, preliminary discussions have been held with local landowners to assess potential for a public access.

Finally, in Venango, FCVC worked with borough officials through the Creek Town program to build a relationship with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC). WPC purchased property in the Borough and is restoring it to a natural state, providing an excellent example of how the Creek Town Program balances conservation with economic development and outdoor recreation.

Expanding the Creek Town Program

Since the program’s launch, new communities have expressed interest in joining the program, including Cochranton, Union City and Meadville. Preliminary meetings have been held with officials in all three communities and Cochranton has already held a community needs assessment. Union City and Meadville are tentatively planning on beginning their programs in the spring of 2014.

In 2014, the Creek Towns program will focus on implementing signage in all of the communities, planning and holding a regional event and hosting several day-long paddling events, providing guided tours through each community.



conclusion

At a time when funding for many state and local government community development programs is being eliminated, it is essential that towns develop alternative models. The River Town Program is based on a cooperative, collaborative approach that builds closer connections between communities and their riverfronts as a significant asset with the potential for attracting visitors, business and economic revival. As these communities begin to realize the economic potential represented by the river as a resource, they become invested in its long-term sustainability. The River Town Program embodies PEC’s vision, recognizing the inextricable links between the environment, the economy and our quality of life.

Acknowledgement of Funding

The River Town Program has been generously supported by multiple funders. In particular, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and a foundation who wishes to remain anonymous have provided support. Over the first three years of the Mon River Town Program, over \$1 million was raised by PEC and its partner organizations to support River Town related projects. Additional funders of specific projects include the following:

- Alpha Natural Resources
 - Appalachian Regional Commission
 - Colcom Foundation
 - Community Foundation of Fayette County
 - The Fayette Community Growth Fund
 - Greene County Tourism Agency
 - Keep PA Beautiful
 - Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau
 - PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
 - Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers
- Port of Pittsburgh Commission
 - Rails to Trails Conservancy
 - Richard King Mellon Foundation
 - Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area
 - Student Conservation Association
 - The Heinz Endowments
 - The Sprout Fund
 - The Trail Volunteer Fund
 - Washington County Tourism Promotion Agency
 - West Penn Power Sustainable Energy Fund

